Unique ways of seeing: Five children's approaches to observational drawing

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the drawing responses of five young children (aged between five and six) when invited to observe a hippeastrum plant. The drawing activity began with a brief verbal introduction, after which the children could complete their drawings however they liked. The drawing process was observed and recorded by running record and the analysis of the data (i.e., observation notes, drawings, research conversation transcripts) was made using an interpretive lens, guided by socio-cultural theories. I found that although each child ''observed'' the same plant, their drawings - and their drawing processes-had unique features reflecting their individual identities. Additionally, despite the small sample size, some gender and age differences were also notable. The data presented here are part of a larger study looking at the communicative potential of young children's drawings in a Reception/Year One class in a rural school in the South West of England (Hall, 2010).

Introduction

This paper discusses how children's observational drawings can provide insights into their identity construction. In contrast to popular Modernist assumptions about self-expression, I reject the notion that art is shaped by what is ''within'' the individual. To elucidate, Warin (2010) describes the concept of ''self'' using two metaphors: that of the chameleon and the snail. Rather than the self being something that is carried with us through life, like a snail's shell, I support an understanding ''where identity does not exist outside the social context in which it is constructed…it is like a chameleon that changes its colour according to the environment'' (Warin, 2010, p. 20). Like identity, art is always a product of the social context in which it was created and different social contexts present different possibilities for children's actions and self-perceptions (Morrow, 2006).

From a socio-cultural standpoint, drawing is a symbolic tool and a powerful means of communication. For example, Bruner (1986, p. 49) comments that: ''the artist creates possible worlds though the

metaphoric transformation of the ordinary and the conventionally given''. It is notable that this is also evident in children's art making (e.g., Ahn & Filipenko, 2007). For young children in particular, making art offers valuable opportunities for individual and shared meanings through exploration and discussion (McLennan, 2010). Further, Bruner (1979, p. 117-118) suggests that ''one seeks to equip the child with deeper, more gripping, and subtler ways of knowing the world and himself [sic.]''. I propose that drawing might aid deeper, more gripping, and subtler ways of knowing the world, especially if it is seen as one way of creating the possible worlds to which Bruner refers. Crucially, I argue that the process and product of drawing enables identity construction and this can empower young children (Hall, 2010).

The data presented here are part of a larger study looking at the communicative potential of young children's drawings in an English primary school (Hall, 2010). This research builds on the work of those who have used socio-cultural theories to investigate the influence of context on young children's drawing, meaning making, and representation at home and school (e.g., Anning & Ring, 2004; Brooks, 2002; Ring, 2003). I was interested in the meanings that the children attached to their drawings in discussion, what Wright (2007, p. 43) refers to as ''telling''. These meanings are essentially intersubjective, and constructed in what Pollard (1996, p. 5) calls ''the inter-personal domain''. In the context of my study the inter-personal domain was created in the research conversations about the drawings. Further details about data collection and analysis will be outlined later on.

Drawing and identity

Warin (2010) offers an accessible explanation of the self, but it is necessary to expand upon this. Contemporary theorists define identity as a complex and changeable construct, influenced by socio-cultural factors. For example, De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) argue that changes in social contexts result in changes in social roles and perceptions of self. Consistent with this view is the multidimensional model of identity formation and identity maintenance proposed by Côté and Levine (2002). They suggest that identity is negotiated in social contexts in an iterative process; identities are affirmed or discredited by the individual as well as being either validated by or challenged by others. Adults play a significant role in the formation of children's identities, particularly in terms of offering ''ideas and ideals'' (De Ruyter & Conroy, 2002, p. 509). However, children are also actively involved in their own identity construction through their participation in the discourses and practices of their social worlds, and the ways in which meanings are negotiated in different contexts (Edmiston, 2008).

Although most art and identity research has been conducted with teenagers and pre-adolescents (e.g., Kárpáti & Kovaks, 1997; Smagorinsky, 2010), there have been some studies into identity and younger children's drawings. For example, Ahn and Filipenko (2007) examined young children's spontaneous narratives in play and visual representation in a Canadian kindergarten. They found identity construction to be a key theme; the children in their study used narratives to explore roles and positions, constructing their identities as moral, social, cultural and gendered beings. These findings are closely related to those of Hawkins (2002, p. 216), researching siblings drawing together in England, who asserts that children's identities are ''called into being'' through drawing, and Edmiston (2008), in America, who highlights the significance of play as a vehicle for children's exploration of possible selves and identities. Referring to the post-structural writings of Bakhtin, Edmiston (2008, p.98) says that play events involve combining everyday experiences with imagination, and in between everyday space and imagined space there is an ''authoring space'' for self.

Play and drawing need to be seen as ''mutually constitutive sociocultural practices'' (Wood & Hall, 2011, p. 276). Building on Edmiston's (2008) work and adopting Moyles's (1989, p. 12) definition of drawing as a type of ''intellectual play'', I propose that drawing offers a powerful authoring space for self. Children not only use drawings to make sense of the world around them (Matthews, 2003) but also to create their own worlds and cultures (Thompson, 1999). These worlds and cultures create authoring spaces where children can construct -and play with- identities. In drawing they can be anyone, anywhere, at any time; this connects with Bruner's (1986) notion of the ''possible worlds'' that the artist creates. In my study (Hall, 2010) the children exhibited competence and creativity in fusing everyday experiences and imagination in their drawings. Crucially, the drawings become spaces for intellectual play and identity construction. Below I will explain the route to this conclusion.

The research

The data here are part of a larger study looking at the communicative potential of young children's drawings in a Reception/Year One class in a rural school in the South West of England (Hall, 2010). Case studies were made of 14 children: eight girls and six boys aged between 4 years, 8 months and 5 years, 11 months (at the start of the study), their parents and teacher. The main research questions focused on what young children communicate through drawing, how young children communicate through drawing, and influences on young children's communication through drawing.

Following ethical consent, data were collected over one school year, in three seven-week research phases (autumn, spring, and summer). The research was conducted with the children rather than on them (Mayall, 2000). For example, I made and shared a storyboard about the research and the children took a small version of this home. Following Ring (2003), scrapbooks provided an appropriate way of collating drawings. Each child was given home and school scrapbooks and the drawings were discussed in individual, audio-recorded, un-structured research conversations. I created a safe, listening space, ''thus allowing layers of meanings and significance to emerge'' (Leitch, 2008, p. 54). The class teacher, Faye, was interviewed at the beginning and end of each phase, and the children's parents were interviewed once every phase. These interviews were semi-structured and involved gathering background information about the children and discussing the drawings in detail. Observations of the children drawing in class were also conducted and recorded by running records. These methods were repeated for each phase. The children were asked to choose their own pseudonyms and throughout the research they were recognised as expert informers and witnesses regarding their own experiences and perspectives (Wood, 2005).

In total, 882 drawings were collected over the three phases. Most of these were spontaneously produced, rather than being requested by an adult. Before any systematic analysis could take place, data were organised and logged to make the case studies database (Yin, 1994). The analytical framework was developed through an iterative process, drawing on previous studies and the nature of the data gathered in my study. Data were coded manually and a systematic approach was used in order to recognise patterns and relationships (Radnor, 2001). As it is possible to misinterpret or over-interpret drawings (Brittain, 1979), internal validity was achieved through utilising multiple data sources: drawings, conversation and interview transcripts, observation notes, my research diary and other empirical research. The children's narratives about their drawings were triangulated with the data gained from the adult interviews. In order to ensure reliability and consistency, expert colleagues were asked to interpret data samples by assigning coding. For example, in terms of drawing content,

categories were identified to include all visible elements. The analysis was later expanded to include non-visible elements and the context of the drawing.

In the second phase of data collection (spring), one of the children's mothers brought in a hippeastrum plant- a striking tropical plant with bold flowers -as she thought that the class would be interested in watching it grow. When I visited one afternoon, Faye suggested that I lead some observational drawing of the plant with a small group. After asking for volunteers, Faye chose three boys and three girls to participate (one girl was not part of the study - her parents had not given their informed consent, so I did not record her work). We sat around a large table and I began with a brief introduction, discussing size, proportions, and colours. Following my input, the children were free to complete their drawings however they liked. Resources included A3 white paper, HB pencils, and coloured felt-tip pens. The drawing process was observed and recorded by running record and analysis of the data (i.e., observation notes, drawings, and research conversation transcripts) followed the interpretive approach explained above.

Below the drawings are presented in age order, from oldest to youngest: Jim, Beckham, Ann, Rosie, and Red Dragon (the children's self-selected pseudonyms). Each drawing is contextualised in reference to the wider data set and similarities and differences noted. It is acknowledged that there is a degree of subjectivity in interpretation and alternative ''readings'' are possible. However, grounding the analysis in the wider study strengthens authenticity and trustworthiness because single drawings are not analysed in isolation (Paine, 1992; Thompson, 1999).

Jim's drawing

Despite being the oldest child in the wider study, Jim was not the most confident drawer and it is notable that many of the features in his drawing (Figure 1) appear to have been influenced by peers. One example is the sun in the top left, which Ann was the first to include in her drawing.

Jim seemed to be concerned with accuracy. He started drawing in pencil and rubbed out the pot, saying that it was ''in the wrong place''. He then turned the paper over to begin again. It is notable that Jim only decided to do this after Rosie had turned her paper over. Additionally, when he had drawn the little shoots next to the main stem I commented that he had been looking carefully and he replied that he had been looking at Rosie's drawing as well as the plant. Interestingly, Rosie was perceived as a competent drawer by the other children and perhaps Jim saw her as a source of inspiration to help him make a better drawing (Thompson, 1999).

Like Ann and Rosie, Jim included a figure in his drawing; but in contrast to the girls' figures (Figures 3 and 4), Jim's figure is small and featureless. This finding agrees with the wider data set: the boys were far less likely than the girls to draw figures, and the boys were also less likely to include detail on their figures compared to the girls. The girls' preference for drawing people is consistent with the findings of other research (e.g., Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey & Flichtbeil, 2006; Ring, 2003). During the drawing activity Jim referred to the figure as himself, happily declaring: ''check it out: I'm standing on a baby flower!''. This comment was probably aimed at amusing the other children, but perhaps it is also a reflection of his construction of gender. In the wider data set, flowers were infrequently drawn by the boys, perhaps because they associated them with femininity.

Figure 1: Jim (6 years, 3 months)

There is yet further evidence of Jim's self-criticality. In discussing the drawing, he said: ''It's kind of a robot and I did it again cos it was wrong, so I did brown on top. Can you see that?''. However, Jim said that he liked the stalk the most ''cos it's nice and straight''. Unlike the other children, he used a ruler to draw the stalk. This action could be interpreted as a desire for precision, and was perhaps prompted by the fear of drawing a long straight line by freehand. Like Beckham, many of Jim's drawings in phase one of the research (the autumn) had been black and white with light pencil pressure, indicating some tentativeness. Seemingly influenced by Beckham, Jim added a blue background, although his colouring is less dense than Beckham's. It could be that he thought a background was a good idea, but the colouring-in was too time-consuming.

Despite Jim's apparent concern with creating an accurate drawing, he drew a seed at the bottom of the pot; even though he could not have seen this. However, my interpretation is that in using his imagination to draw a feature that he could not see, Jim was communicating his scientific understanding about plants.

Beckham's drawing

Beckham approached the drawing activity confidently. As noted above, many of his earlier drawings appeared tentative, but this drawing is bold. Faye said Beckham had recently been making his work very colourful. She showed me a piece of his creative writing and explained that she had to take it away from him before he covered the whole page with colour. Beckham used a similar approach in the hippeastrum drawing (Figure 2), with layers of colour and different marks. A group of Hong Kong kindergarten children thought that good drawings were colourful and involved a high level of concentration (Wong, 2007); as Beckham's drawing fulfils these criteria perhaps he also saw it as a ''good'' drawing. It is notable that Beckham started layering the colours just after I had spoken to Ann about the coloured stripes on her pot. This shows a possible peer influence on the drawing, but perhaps he thought I liked the idea of a stripy pot and wanted to please me.

During the activity, Beckham held two green pens against the stalk to check for a best match. This seems to indicate that he wanted his drawing to be realistic. However, the way that he has drawn the pot is quite unlike the other children; its circular form is highly stylized. I suggest that Beckham's emphasis on what appears to be a top view of the pot is related to his interest in shape. Of all the children in the study, Beckham gave special attention to shape and pattern, reflecting his love of mathematics. When I asked Beckham how he had decided on which colours to use, he replied ''cos I like them''. This matter-of-fact response was typical of Beckham; very rarely did he explain anything in detail.

Figure 2: Beckham (6 years, 0 months)

Beckham showed me his drawing part way through the activity and said it was not yet finished. When I suggested he check his drawing against the plant, he then said that it was finished; perhaps because he thought the drawing looked sufficiently like the actual plant. However, he returned to his drawing a little while later to add some further detail in the form of coloured dots. While Beckham was adding these marks to his drawing he started saying ''dot, dot, dot etc.'' to himself. This chant then turned into a song, which perhaps reflected his kinaesthetic pleasure in the drawing activity (Anning, 1997). None of the other children sang whilst they drew during this activity.

In discussing the drawing, Beckham noted that he wanted to colour in more of the background blue but he ''couldn't finish''. He also pointed out how he had mistakenly made a blue mark on the green stem. These comments are evidence of self-criticality. He thought the best feature of the drawing was the ''big dots'', which he explained were seeds. Although he could not have seen any seeds on the surface of the soil during the observation, he told me, adamantly, that the seeds were in the soil. He went on to say that the red was soil, the grey was the pot, and the blue was water. In mentioning water, it could be that he was communicating his scientific knowledge about plant growth, as Jim did. Again, the water was an imaginary feature.

Ann's drawing

Unfortunately, I was not able to discuss Ann's hippeastrum drawing (Figure 3) with her; therefore I cannot share her explanation of the drawing or comment on her thoughts on the activity. However, I did observe her making the drawing and it is informative to compare her approach to the activity with that of the other children.

Figure 3: Ann (5 years, 10 months)

Ann included additional features in her drawing. For example, she drew a sun, which Jim later copied, and she also asked if she could draw a figure next to her plant, which then influenced Rosie's drawing. In addition, as noted above, Beckham started to layer colours in his drawing after I had spoken to Ann about her drawing. These findings indicate how Ann's approach to the activity affected the drawings of the other children. Also, it is notable that in the wider study the girls tended to use a wider range of colours in their drawings compared to the boys. I am unsure whether it was Ann or Red Dragon who first made their pot look three-dimensional by the inclusion of a rounded base, but as they were sitting next to each other it seems that some form of peer influence occurred.

As noted above, in relation to the wider data set, the girls were far more likely than the boys to draw people. The figure in this drawing is Ann, as she declared when drawing it. During a previous research conversation she told me she like to draw herself best of all, so the inclusion of the figure here could be seen as a way of asserting her ownership of the drawing (Anning & Ring, 2004). The plant is not very detailed, so it might be that she was more interested in drawing the figure. However, given that Ann's plant is much smaller than the other children's, it could be argued there was not much scope for the inclusion of detail.

It is notable that Ann was the only child to use two different colours for the flowers. A possible explanation could be that she wanted to use a variety of colours and was not particularly concerned with creating a realistic representation. This interpretation seems to be supported by her decision to add stripes to the pot. However, there is also evidence of her attempting to make the pot appear three-dimensional. Discussing the drawing with Ann would have helped to make sense of her intentions, which are commonly multifarious (Matthews, 2003). It would also have been interesting to see whether she showed any evidence of self-criticality.

Rosie's drawing

Rosie's drawing (Figure 4) bears some similarity to Ann's, as both girls included a female figure to the right of the plant. Rosie asked me if they could draw people after Ann added a figure to her drawing, which is evidence of peer influence. Rosie usually liked to create fancy outfits and elaborate hairstyles, and tell stories about parties and dancing. In the wider data set, drawings about birthdays and parties were much more popular with the girls. Unusually, in discussing this particular drawing Rosie did not share an accompanying narrative. I suggest this is because the drawing was not self-motivated. The relationship between the figure and the plant is not clear, but in discussion Rosie told me that: ''I'm standing next to a plant, it's growing and it's a real one in our classroom''.

Figure 4: Rosie (5 years, 7 months)

Out of all of the children, Rosie showed the most evidence of self-criticality about her drawing. Like Jim, after an unsatisfactory initial attempt, she decided to start again. In explaining her rationale, Rosie remarked: ''I didn't like the flower cos it was pointing upwards and downwards and it was all over the place!''. This shows she evaluated her initial drawing and was not happy with it, although she was also able to laugh at her first attempt to draw the flower. A second example of self-criticality was when she also told me that the crown was white because she had no time to add colour. In the wider data set, it is notable that the girls were more likely than the boys to point out un-realised drawing intentions, such as un-coloured part of a drawing or ''missing features''. Another example of Rosie's self-criticality in given in the following excerpt from our research conversation:

EH: Do you want to tell me anything else about drawing today?
R: Yeah. Um, the plant was really hard to copy because of this lump (indicates), this bit. It's the ...bulb, what this thing grows [out of].
EH: Yes?
R: This is, the pot is, um really...br-, this is brown and the pot's brown and, um...
EH: And the blub?
R: And the bulb is [brown], so it's really, so it's really hard to see which is which.

These comments indicate that Rosie seemed to be concerned about differentiating the various parts of the drawing. Additionally, in terms of scientific knowledge, Rosie was the only one of the five children to use the word ''bulb''. In the wider research, Rosie was the most likely to explain her drawing processes without prompting. During the activity she showed me how she could colour the stem with three pen strokes, communicating her competence in using the drawing media. Rosie later glued some sand to her drawing and said this was something that Faye let them do, perhaps anticipating my asking her about this. Rosie explained how she stuck the sand on: ''you put glue, then you put dust on,

you can still, still see the drawing [underneath]''. Perhaps the sand was a substitute for glitter, which, according to Hope (2008), girls like to use to decorate their art work and make it beautiful. When I asked Rosie about her previous experiences of observational drawing, she said that she did not like copying things from life: ''cos most things are...they've got loads of sides and they're really hard!''. Here, Rosie was sharing her frustration at not being able to show three-dimensional objects to her satisfaction. This is evidence of her self-perception as a drawer.

Red Dragon's drawing

Red Dragon was the only Reception-aged child to participate in the activity and he was also the only child to not use colour in his drawing (Figure 5). This finding agrees with the wider data set, as Red Dragon and the other two Reception boys were less likely than the older children to produce colourful drawings (Malchiodi, 1998). This was both an age and gender-related finding; as noted above, the girls generally used more colour than the boys.

Red Dragon's approach to the drawing activity was less involved than the other children: he drew quietly and did not chat to the others. He told me that he had completed his drawing after only a few minutes, so I suggested that he could include some more detail. He added some more petals to the flowers and then decided that it was finished. I asked if he wanted to add any colour, but he said no. Having done his drawing, Red Dragon was keen to move on to another activity in the classroom. In light of previous observations of Red Dragon drawing at school, this behaviour was fairly typical.

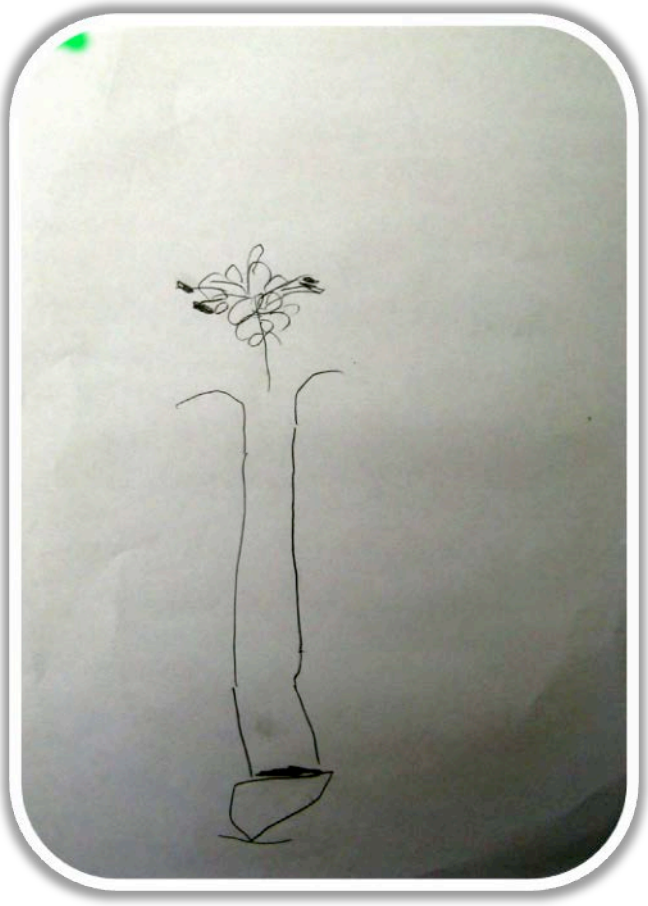

Figure 5: Red Dragon (5 years, 0 months)

This drawing could be described as the least realistic, because it shows a cut-away view of the pot and the stem of the plant seems to be floating in space. However, in drawing a rounded shape at the base of the pot, it appears that Red Dragon attempted to represent the three-dimensional nature of the object he saw in front of him. In this respect his drawing bears some similarity with Ann's, although her pot is stripy and colourful. It also looks like Red Dragon has included a baseline under his pot, which could be indicating the table. However, this could be an erroneous assumption (Brittain, 1979).

Although Red Dragon was the youngest child to observe the plant, when talking to me about his drawing he used more scientific terminology than the older children. For example, he referred to ''petals'', ''stalk'' and ''pollen''. Again, the opportunity to discuss his drawing allowed him to position himself as knowledgeable. Unlike some of the older children, Red Dragon did not show any self-criticality in relation to his drawing. He seemed to be satisfied with it and told me that he thought it was ''easy-peasy'' to draw. This comment shows that he was confident in his drawing skills.

Red Dragon did not want to spend much time discussing his drawing and this is perhaps indicative of it being non-spontaneous. However, in the next phase of the study Red Dragon made a drawing on the computer and told me that he had been thinking about this (hippeastrum) flower at the time. This shows that he was able to recall the drawing activity after a couple of months, even though his involvement in it had been relatively short.

Discussion

As mentioned above, the vast majority of the 882 drawings collected over the three phases of the research (Hall, 2010) were created spontaneously. Paine (1992) argues that spontaneous drawings, as products of self-motivation, are worthy of attention as they reflect children's interests, rather than adults' expectations. I concur with this viewpoint. However, it is notable that the five (non-spontaneous) drawings discussed in this paper also reflect the children's interests. This could be because they were free to add additional features to their drawings and I did not correct what some might consider to be ''mistakes''. Although such an approach can be criticized for potentially limiting learning in art (Bresler, 1993), I suggest it has value in allowing for individual meaning-making. The children's creative responses combined what they observed with ideas from their imagination. Additionally, the children used their ''funds of knowledge'' (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) in both making the drawings and in discussing them. For example, they shared scientific knowledge about plants and artistic knowledge about the drawing process.

In the wider research, although the communicative potential of the children's drawings was considerably broad, identity was a dominant theme in relation to the data. The suggestion that drawing offers a space for identity construction is supported by the findings of Hawkins (2002) and Ahn and Filipenko (2007), but my conclusions are based on a much larger evidence base. Importantly, I found that the drawings offered spaces for intellectual play and identity construction, where the children positioned themselves as competent and creative individuals. Additionally, the drawings were shaped by a variety of shifting socio-cultural factors stemming from home, school, and elsewhere. For example, peer influences were particularly evident in relation to the hippeastrum drawings.

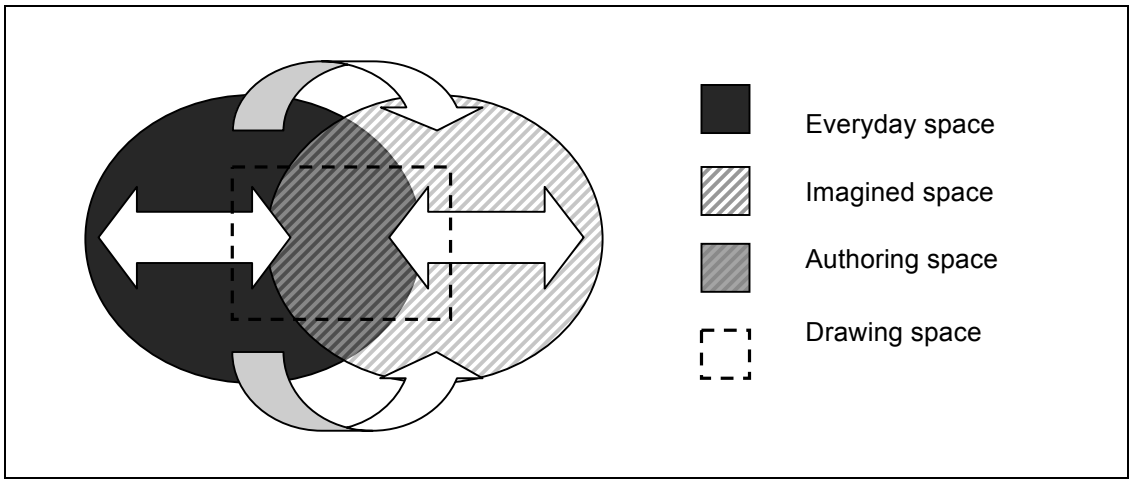

Figure 6: Drawing as a Space for Intellectual Play and Identity Construction
(Developed from Edmiston, 2008)

The model shown in Figure 6 illustrates the theory that I developed from the findings of the wider research, with reference to the work of Moyles (1989) and Edmiston (2008). Firstly, Moyles's (1989, p. 12) definition of drawing as a type of ''intellectual play'', involving aesthetics, imagination, fantasy, reality and innovation aligns well with my findings. Secondly, Edmiston's (2008) work on play and identity construction is highly relevant. As previously explained, Edmiston says that play events involve combining everyday experiences with imagination, and in between everyday space and imagined space there is an ''authoring space'' for self. I build on Edmiston's ideas by asserting the existence of a ''drawing space'' and suggest that identity construction (authoring) takes place in this drawing space, where ''possible worlds'' (Bruner, 1986, p. 49) become visible.

Returning to the hippeastrum drawings, the relative freedom of the activity meant that the children had good scope for intellectual play. In a typical observational drawing activity in a primary classroom, teachers are likely to encourage attention to detail and those drawings that bear the closest resemblance to the object, person, or view being observed might be regarded as the most competent. In contrast, I was not especially concerned with promoting the development of technical skills or aesthetic qualities; neither was I interested in making judgements about the drawings using these criteria. Instead, I was interested in the personal significance of the drawings. If I had been acting as a teacher rather than a researcher I might have taken a different approach. Nonetheless, the implications of my findings highlight the value of providing adequate scope for creative interpretations during observational drawing, as this recognises children as unique individuals. Despite some similarities in both the drawing process and resulting product, each child produced a personal response. MacNaughton (2004) states that critical theorists do not see unique individualism as a possibility, but my findings support the possibility of individuality within socio-cultural boundaries. Further to this, I suggest that the peer influences on the children's drawings were the result of autonomous choices about how they approached the activity (Helwig, 2006). Adopting Warin's (2010, p. 20) ''chameleon'' metaphor of the self, it is highly likely that the children's drawing responses would have been differently influenced when working in another environment, with other children. My - albeit brief - comments during the activity may also have affected some of their drawing decisions. However, each child's drawing and commentary offers valuable insights into their unique ways of seeing.

Finally, although nearly 900 drawings were collected across the three phases of the research, it is significant that only one of these was a spontaneous observational drawing. This drawing, a view from a window, was made by a Year One girl who was the most prolific and technically advanced drawer in the class, towards the end of the summer term. This finding indicates that the children did not seem to be interested in making drawings from observation without adult guidance. It also seems to suggest that older, and more confident drawers, are more likely to create self-motivated observational drawings than younger, and less confident drawers. This is an area that is worthy of further investigation.

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